

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 0286

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AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SINGAPORE 1246

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT

SUBJ: NEW LEGISLATION GOVERNING NEWSPAPERS INTRODUCED

1. LEGISLATION TO GIVE THE GOS AUTHORITY OVER
FOREIGN FUNDING FOR NEWSPAPERS AND REQUIRING ALL NEWS-
PAPERS TO BECOME PUBLIC COMPANIES WITH BOTH ORDINARY
AND MANAGEMENT SHARES WAS INTRODUCED IN PARLIAMENT LAST
THURSDAY UNDER THE NEWSPAPER AND PRINTING PRESSES ACT.

2. INTENT OF THE NEW LEGISLATION IS TO GIVE
LEGAL BASIS TO AD HOC AND INFORMAL ARRANGEMENTS
THAT HAVE EXISTED SINCE THE MAY 1971 PRESS CRISIS AND
IS SIMILAR TO CONTROLS ALREADY LEGALIZED BY THE GOM
IN KUALA LUMPUR.

3. THE SINGAPORE STRAITS TIMES MONDAY, IN AN EDITORIAL
THAT MOSTLY SUPPORTED THE GOVERNMENT'S POSITION, POINTED
OUT THAT THERE WAS ONE UNEXPECTED PROVISION, A "MORE
CONTROVERSIAL MATTER" CONCERNING MANAGEMENT SHARES. UNDER
THE PROPOSED LEGISLATION, THE OWNERSHIP OF MANAGEMENT SHARES
WOULD BE SUBJECT TO MINISTERIAL APPROVAL ONLY, THUS RE-
MOVING FROM NEWSPAPER COMPANIES ANY CONTROL OVER THE
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OWNERSHIP OF MANAGEMENT SHARES. THE STRAITS TIMES

POINTS OUT THAT THE CONCEPT OF MANAGEMENT SHARES, WHICH GIVE DISPROPORTIONATE VOTING RIGHTS TO CERTAIN SHARE-HOLDERS, WAS REJECTED BY SINGAPORE IN 1967, WAS ABOLISHED IN THE NEW COMPANIES ACT, AND IS NOW BEING REINTRODUCED, BUT ONLY IN THE CASE OF NEWSPAPER COMPANIES. THE STRAITS TIMES IS CONCERNED THAT ALL CONTROL OF THE NEWSPAPERS WILL NOW PASS INTO THE HANDS OF MANAGEMENT SHARE-HOLDERS HAND-PICKED BY THE ACTING UNDER ORDERS FROM THE GOS. IN CONCLUSION, THE PAPER SUGGESTED THAT THIS PRO-VISION NEEDS CAREFUL STUDY AND PROPOSED THAT THE BILL BE SENT TO SELECT COMMITTEE WHICH "MIGHT ALSO ALLOW TIME FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO CLARIFY ITS CURRENT THINKING ON THE PROPOSED PRESS COUNCIL, ANNOUNCED SOME FOURTEEN MONTHS AGO."

4. COMMENT: WHILE THEY HAVE NOT YET REACTED EDITORIALY, SINGAPORE'S TWO LARGE CHINESE LANGUAGE PAPERS, NANYANG SIANG PAU AND SIN CHEW JIT POH, LARGELY OWNED RESPECTIVELY BY THE LEE (NO RELATION TO PRIME MINISTER) AND AW FAMILIES ARE THE REAL TARGET OF THE MANAGEMENT SHARES PROVISION. WHILE THROUGH INFORMAL ARRANGEMENTS THE GOS HAS BEEN ABLE TO EXERT SUBSTANTIAL CONTROL OVER THEM SINCE 1971 (PUBLISHER OF NANYANG IS STILL IN PRISON), IT CLEARLY WISHES TO ELIMINATE ALL POSSIBLE CHANCE OF OPPOSITION IN THE FUTURE.

5. DESPITE THE SUGGESTION OF THE STRAITS TIMES THAT THE LEGISLATION BE STUDIED FURTHER, IT IS LIKELY TO PASS UNCHANGED. IT IS UNLIKELY THE STRAITS TIMES EXPECTS ANY OTHER RESULT. MORE PROBABLY ITS PRINCIPAL REASON FOR EXPRESSING CONCERN IS TO MAINTAIN SOME SEMBLANCE OF PUBLIC CREDIBILITY IN THE PRESS. HOWEVER, ALL AMBIGUITY IS NOW REMOVED; SINGAPORE'S NEWS MEDIA WILL BE FIRMLY AND LEGALLY UNDER THE DIRECT CONTROL OF THE GOVERNMENT.
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